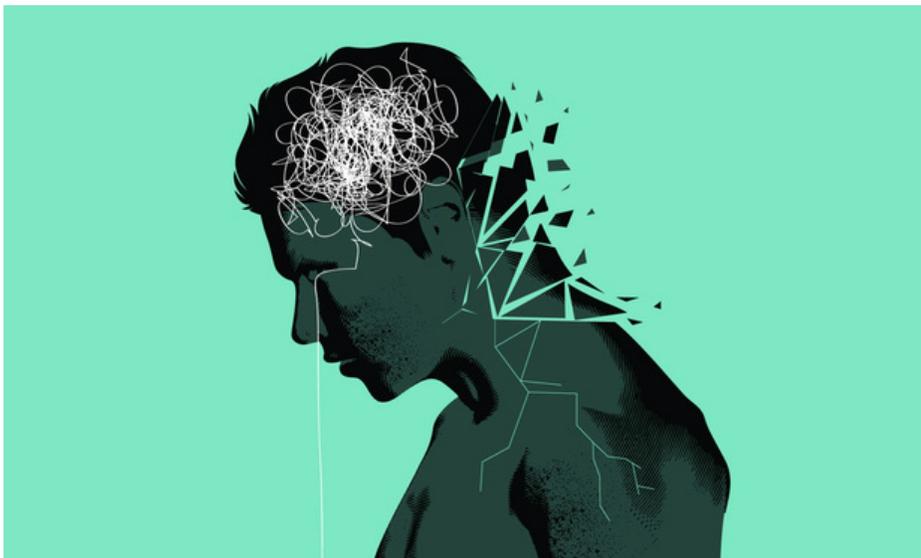


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A Lawyer Who Survived His Suicide Attempt Recounts His Experience

"People around you care about you more than you think," said Eric Lang.

By Jonathan Ringel | October 10, 2019



(Photo: solarseven/Shutterstock.com)

Eric Lang is fortunate to be alive and to be practicing law.

In the fall of 2012, Lang had been a lawyer for 22 years. He had graduated from the University of Florida law school, worked for what was then Long Aldridge & Norman (now Dentons) and Paul Hastings and was now running his own practice, the Lang Legal Group.



Eric Lang, Lang Legal Group.
(Courtesy photo)

Lang also had fallen into serious trouble, as he told a group at Temple Sinai in Sandy Springs gathered for a Sunday morning talk on "Confronting Mental Health Issues in Your Profession."

After years of success, including winning cases in which he'd prepared only in the final 48 hours before trial, he said he had no reason to examine himself or his habits.

He didn't know—as he would learn later—that most people don't start every day wondering whether to kill themselves.

Facing financial difficulties, Lang had taken money from an account he was holding for a client, intending to pay it back once fees he expected from other work arrived. Later, he would neglect to tell a client some bad news, figuring he knew a way to fix the problem before the client would

find out. Both were violations of the Georgia bar's Rules of Professional Conduct, with punishments reaching to disbarment.

Lang said he gathered a lot of pills and washed them down with vodka. He woke up in a hospital, where he'd participate in group therapy sessions with 14 other professionals, mostly lawyers and doctors, he said.

Three of those from the group have since died by suicide. "Mental health disorders are fatal," he said.

They are also treatable. The other 12, he said, are doing well.

Lang said it took doctors about 18 months to find the right "cocktail" of medicines that would work for him.

"When they got it right, my behavior changed," he said, noting later that he used to exhibit one trait of bipolar disorder (<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/bipolar-disorder/index.shtml>), "unexpected fits of rage or anger."

Lang said he'd expressed concern to one doctor that he feared medicines would remove his competitive edge in the law, saying his ability to speed through work embodied "my worth as an attorney."

The doctor responded that he would still be fast, but he wouldn't crash, or if he did, he wouldn't crash as hard.

Lang's bar violations from before his symptoms were treated effectively led to two suspensions from the practice of law totaling 24 months. The state Supreme Court decisions (<https://www.gabar.org/disciplinehistory.cfm?id=NDM1NTE1>) addressing his case describe how Lang deceived not only his client but also opposing counsel and their client as he tried to hide his having taken the money from the trust account.

But the court also found "substantial mitigating circumstances," such as Lang's pro bono work, remorse for his wrongdoing, apologies to his client and others and having made full restitution. Upon his return to practice, every three months a psychologist or psychiatrist was required to assure bar discipline authorities of his fitness to practice law.

Lang now spends some of his time speaking to bar groups and others, such as the one at his synagogue, which this reporter also attends, about his experience with mental health issues.

In a paper he has presented to bar groups, Lang examined 23 Georgia bar discipline cases in which mental health played a role. "Although the Georgia Supreme Court treats every attorney discipline case on its own merits, definable steps have evolved when asserting an attorney's mental health as a mitigating factor, all of which require the attorney to be exceedingly open," Lang concluded.

"The attorney must recognize the wrongful act, eliminate the harm it caused and demonstrate remorse. The attorney must then demonstrate—not just assert—that a mental health issue exists, relates to the wrongful act, and is the subject of ongoing treatment."

He noted that many of the attorneys described in his paper were reinstated, under varying conditions, showing "the opportunity for a return after rehabilitation is clearly present."

In a footnote, Lang noted his own bar discipline experience, adding he "is not competent to give a detached evaluation of those matters, other than to express gratefulness to the State Bar of Georgia and the Georgia Supreme Court for understanding repayment, remorse, mental condition, and the necessity and efficacy of treatment."

One part of Lang's presentation concerned how people can help loved ones, friends, colleagues and others who are going through a mental health problem.

First Lang suggested several things people should avoid saying, such as: "Snap out of it," "Things will get better" and almost any sentence that begins with, "Let me tell you."

Similarly, he compared telling people struggling with depression to "try harder," "be courageous" or "choose happiness" to someone saying, "You with the asthma—breathe slower."

On the positive side, Lang said that if you're close to a person struggling, "Be there." That is, you don't have to say the right things or even talk, but you can be there—perhaps more often—doing the things you tend to do together.

If you're concerned, you can tell the person, ideally by stating a behavior you've noticed rather than saying, "You seem depressed."

"I've noticed you've missed poker night recently," he suggested as an example, adding that offering to pick the person up for the next card game would be helpful.

One can also ask a clergy member to call on the person to report that someone is concerned; he suggested the person struggling might feel more comfortable speaking to a third party.

Similarly, he said within the State Bar of Georgia, lawyers can ask the Lawyers Assistance Program (<https://www.gabar.org/committeesprogramssections/programs/lap/>) to check on a bar member about whom another lawyer is concerned.

Said Lang, "People around you care about you more than you think."

If you are a state bar member and you are concerned about yourself or another bar member, the Lawyer Assistance Program's confidential helpline is 800-327-9631.

Here are two resources available to anyone:

- *The Georgia Crisis and Access helpline, a free, 24/7 service providing mental health crisis assistance and access to mental health resources throughout the state of Georgia, is 800-715-4225.*
- *The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 800-273-8255.*

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